DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 600 SO 034 374

AUTHOR	Deardorff, Michelle D.; Folger, Paul J.
TITLE	Assessment That Matters: Integrating the "Chore" of Department-Based Assessment with Real Improvements in Undergraduate Political Science Education.
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 28-September 1, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Departments; Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Institutional Research; *Political Science; *Student Evaluation; *Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS	American Association for Higher Education; Illinois (Decatur); *Millikin University IL

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to show how one political science department at a small midwestern university (Millikin University, Decatur, Illinois) used good assessment practices identified by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and others to effect improvement. The paper argues that these principles can be followed and produce numerous benefits for the department that go beyond the literal acts of planning and engaging in assessment. The case study identifies ways to turn assessment from an external chore to an internal quest for information that provides answers to important departmental questions. It is hoped that some of the experiences and rationale can be modeled at other institutions. Appended is: "Select Principles of Good Assessment Practice." (Author/BT)

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"Assessment that Matters: Integrating the 'Chore' of Department-Based Assessment with Real Improvements in Undergraduate Political Science Education"

ED 476 600

Michelle D. Deardorff

Department of Political Science
Millikin University
Decatur, IL 62522
mdeardorff@mail.millikin.edu
217.424.6321

Paul J. Folger

Coordinator of Institutional Research and Assessment
Millikin University
Decatur, IL 62522
pfolger@mail.millikin.edu
217.424.6255

SO 034 374

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28-September 1, 2002. Boston, Massachusetts.

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to show how one Political Science Department at a small Midwest university utilized good assessment practices identified by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and others in order to effect improvement. We argue that these principles can be followed in a way that is relatively painless for the department and will produce numerous benefits for the department that go beyond the literal acts of planning and engaging in assessment. We hope that some of our experiences and rationale can be modeled at other institutions.

The well-documented decline in the number of political science students nationally coupled with increasing levels of apathy and cynicism in the citizenry (Cortes 1999, Mann 1999, NASS 1999), has heightened administrative scrutiny regarding the role of the undergraduate political science department. We are also entering an environment of heightened assessment requirements, reconsidered canons and definitions of general education, concerns of civic literacy, and new service learning requirements (Fox and Keeter 1996). What role will the political science major play as it must continually justify its existence and significance? Assessment requirements often bring great concerns to departments: fear of loss of autonomy, distraction from primary departmental goals, and the creation of alien and artificial standards. How can an assessment process build departmental unity, focus faculty energies, and promote educational goals? This paper—a collaboration between two political scientists, one a department chair and one a university assessment director—looks at the assessment process that one department of political science followed. This case study identifies ways to turn assessment from an external chore to an internal quest for information that provides answers to important departmental questions. The paper also identifies best practices of assessment and describes systems that use assessment information to create real department improvement.

Good Principles for Assessment

The literature on assessment clearly points out several ways that the assessment process can be done more successfully; in fact, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) produced a list of *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* in 1992 (AAHE, 1992). Many

others have added to this list (Banta, et al., 1996). We will look at several of these items in order to identify do's and don'ts and to clarify our expectations of the assessment process. Please see Appendix I for the entire list.

AAHE Principles

The AAHE piece identifies nine key principles of good assessment practice. The first is that assessment must be rooted in educational values; determining these values can be an excellent exercise for faculty at the department level. We all too often simply take for granted the big picture goal of higher education or assume goals are similar for all members of a given department. We must have clear conversations with our colleagues about what their objectives may be and shape department goals in an intentional way taking into consideration the various aims of our colleagues. These goals can be codified into a formal mission or vision statement at the department level. This principle helps the department clearly identify where it matches up with the mission and vision of the entire division, school, college and/or university. While the mission and vision at each level may be different they should be consistent. This exercise can ground the department in the broader institution.

A second guiding principle from the AAHE is that the assessment process should be rooted in learning, multidimensional, and occur over time. Students learn a variety of things in a variety of different ways at a variety of points in time. Any good assessment process must take this complexity into account. Too often assessment becomes less useful because it becomes an artificial add-on tangential from student learning; for example, many poorly designed assessment projects become a one-shot, one point in time effort, failing to capture the complexity of student learning. Paying attention to these issues can produce more meaningful and useful assessment information in the long run. While the learning process is complex, the assessment process need not be as

complicated. Simple but multiple assessments over time can be straightforward. Different assessment methods designed to measure the same goal can be clear. What is important is how the totality of the assessment activities captures the complexity of what is being measured.

The third guiding principle from AAHE is that the program should have clearly stated goals. This is where a lot of assessment plans at the department level "fall down." While a department can often manage to craft a consistent mission or vision as outlined in principle one above, it may fail to adequately operationalize the concepts articulated in the mission or vision. The reason we often do not want to be precise in our goals is because we are uncomfortable stating "students will do x, y, or z." We often have a hard time doing this when it comes to assessing our own teaching. We fear a system that will force us "to teach to the test." However, we forget that we almost always teach to the test, it is just that we write the test. Good assessment process allows individuals in the department to collectively write the test.

A fourth principle from AAHE is that both student outcomes and student experiences are important goals of the assessment process. In short, process matters and should be assessed. Are students given opportunities to practice skill sets deemed important by the department? Do these opportunities occur over time? Are students given accurate and timely feedback about performance? Are students given clear communication about the goals of individual courses and the department as a whole? Are students exposed to a variety of pedagogies either within one class or over the body of classes they take? Process questions are important outside of the classroom as well. How does the department's advising process work? What types of co-curricular activities are afforded students at the department level (for example Model UN) and what are their impacts? Are students taking advantage of department office hours to the extent we think they should? All of these questions deal with process and are very important. Process is most often one of the things we

can clearly control in order to impact student outcomes. Consequently, we must have a clear picture of the relationship between outcome and process as it exists in our departments.

The fifth principle presented by AAHE states that assessment works best when it is ongoing as opposed to a "one-shot" or even a series of "one-shot" events. At least some of the assessment activities should be longitudinal in design. This may include tracking specific cohorts by class year, by status (for example transfers versus others), by demographic characteristics, or by exposure to a new course, policy or program. A variety of processes can also be tracked over time. Planning assessment activities over time can also impact the culture of assessment. It will send a message that assessment is a part of the standard operating procedures of the department; this can increase faculty "buy-in." Finally, as with just about anything, improvement occurs with practice over time. The department can improve its assessment systems with a longitudinal time commitment.

Principle six recognizes and emphasizes the communal nature of assessment. Assessment will work when the campus as whole is involved and committed. Clearly, assessment is not something that a department chair can simply force upon their colleagues. Similarly, assessment cannot be forced upon a department chair without commitment from the wider university community. Often these commitments come in the form of stipends, course release time, or conference and workshop support. However, campus support must be much wider than this. Assessment activity at the department level will usually involve administrative units across the campus such as student life, institutional research, library, alumni, registrar and academic deans. Group efforts and group dynamics in assessment can produce positive synergies for the department and institution that go well beyond the literal assessment process. For example, relationships and communication lines between various administrative units and the department can be created or enhanced.

The seventh AAHE principle states simply that assessment should address questions that people care about. While this may seem quite clear, the principle is often violated in an assessment culture driven solely by administration or by agents external to the institution. At the department level, such questions might be "Why don't more of our students go on to graduate school?" "What do employers think about our department's graduates in terms of skill sets and overall ability?" What courses or experiences do our alumni think were the most beneficial?" "Do the department's learning goals build upon each other in a clear and sequential way?" Asking relevant questions can excite and motivate department members as well as provide focus to both data collection and data analysis procedures.

Eighth, according to the AAHE, we must not forget that assessment always exists in a wider institutional context. The assessment process cannot and should not be divorced from that context. Unfortunately, in many institutions and departments assessment is addressed only when there is some external accreditation process mandating it. While having solely an external focus for assessment violates several of the principles stated above, an external impetus such as this can be seen as an opportunity to create real and meaningful assessment processes. The governing attitude could become "we have to do it anyway—we may as well do it right," creating a motivating force for assessment. Additionally, institutional-level fundraising campaigns, strategic plans, budget overhauls and the like can all be seen as potential opportunities to infuse assessment practices into the institutional or department culture.

The ninth and final AAHE principle of good assessment practices is that assessment helps us meet our responsibilities to students specifically and to the general public more broadly. Whether we like it or not the culture of consumerism has permeated higher education. Students are often thought of as "customers," courses are "products," and faculty are "employees." While many of us may express dismay over this change in culture, the need for accountability, driven in part by the

consumer culture, is not going to go away. By developing our own assessment processes, we can retain at least some control over the accountability process and more importantly, use assessment information to impact improvement.

Other Principles

A brief scan of the assessment literature shows that several other authors have added to these principles in a variety of ways. Below are some additional guiding thoughts about the general assessment process. Trudy Banta et al. in their book *Assessment in Practice* (1996) identify a tenth principle for good assessment practice. "Assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling" (62). The authors assert that both university leadership in the assessment area and institutional resources sufficient to do assessment activities are crucial to successful assessment. Several case studies explored by the authors cite a breakdown in university leadership and/or institutional resources as the primary cause of a failed assessment program.

In his book *Assessment for Excellence*, Alexander Astin (1993) adds two more principles to the AAHE set of nine. First (our eleventh principle), he states that assessment activity must be grounded in theory. Specifically, "assessment results are of most value when they shed light on the causal connections between educational practice and educational outcomes" (Astin, 1993, xii). We should remember that assessment data and practices can tell us not only about a specific case, such as "students who are active in Model UN do better in their courses," but can also tell us about the general pattern, such as "students who are active in curricular activities learn more in coursework." Consequently, as we begin to develop questions that we want to answer as suggested in principle seven, we should think how those questions can either inductively or deductively be applied to broader theoretical concerns.

Second (our twelfth principle), Astin states that the basic purpose of student assessment is to "enhance their educational development" (Astin, 4) and the basic purpose of faculty assessment is to "enhance their performance as teachers and mentors of students and as contributors to the advancement of knowledge" (Astin, 4). Astin makes specific what is implied in AAHE principles one and two, helping us distinguish between what is merely tangential or busy-work assessment versus real and meaningful assessment.

Catherine Palomba and Trudy Banta (1999, 4) suggest that assessment should also be flexible enough to take into account not only intended educational outcomes but also those that are unintended. For example, while we may plan an assessment project around a notion that advising will enhance student academic performance, the advising process may also enhance social skills as an intended, but very important, byproduct. This will be our thirteenth principle.

Finally (our fourteenth and final principle), as a more specific principle of AAHE number six, Palomba and Banta state that assessment information must be shared with multiple audiences (1999, 4). Assessment reports sitting on a shelf seldom do any good. Such sharing can enhance the institutional culture of assessment, allow for cross-fertilization of ideas in an institution with shared values, help with accountability, and provide for feedback.

Case Study of Millikin University Political Science Department

Given these fourteen principles outlined above, what has been the experience of a small Midwestern political science department's assessment efforts? Below, we present the assessment efforts of Millikin University's Department of Political Science as a case study. Throughout the study, we will identify which of the fourteen principles identified above were or were not met and how.

The department history and culture

Millikin University was founded in 1901 as a small, private, Midwestern, undergraduate institution. A large part of our school's identity is found in the fact that a significant percentage of our students are first-generation college students. In an institution with three professional schools (Nursing, Business, and Fine Arts), the School of Arts and Sciences has accentuated the relationship between the theoretical and the practical. We institutionally emphasize such application-oriented pedagogical approaches as service learning, internships, and experiential education. The Political Science Department became independent from the History Department in 1968 and had been chaired by a single individual until last summer. Between 1968 and 2001, we grew from one tenure-line faculty member to four, from a handful of majors to over sixty. During this period, we have developed a clear and specific vision for our major and a campus reputation for excellence. Over the last year, our department named a new chair, hired two new faculty members, and changed its role in the university curriculum. With the expansion to four faculty lines, a mandate for growth has been placed on the department at the Dean/Provost level; consequently, in 2001 it was time for the department to carefully reconsider our place at Millikin in terms of our curricular and co-curricular programs.

Assessment activities of the recent past

Our department has been carefully and deliberately thinking about and acting on these issues of growth, assessment, and departmental culture for at least the last five years. During this time we have completed our first assessment plan. Our goal has been to rethink the meaning of the department, the purpose of assessment, and the significance of undergraduate education on a regular basis. What has emerged from these discussions has been a claiming of assessment as an inherent part of an academic life, an integration of our teaching, research, and service, and a belief that

faculty and undergraduate students can combine into a vital intellectual community to the benefit of all. **These activities are consistent with good practice items one (assessment rooted in educational values), five (on-going versus one-shot assessment) and six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment).**

With the hiring of a fourth faculty member, we have been able to add new subfields to our departmental curriculum—local/urban politics and public policy. These curricular areas had been frequently requested by past majors and our alumni. In part, because we were able to document this request (through an alumni survey [1980-1995] noting interest areas of alumni and tracing their career paths) the administration was willing to fund the faculty line prior to the promised enrollment growth. However, we needed to deliberately construct this component of our curriculum. With this hiring, our Americanist was able to limit the number of subfields he is forced to cover, but it required negotiation. We hired a new replacement for the retiring chair, however, the new faculty member's expertise and interests were different and therefore that curricular area needed to change. Our remaining faculty member needed to reevaluate her course offerings in light of department curricular changes and new university needs. We were clearly able to inform our hiring and course offering process through the use of assessment data focusing on our recent graduates. **This is consistent with principle six (recognized the communal nature of assessment).**

The Education Department had been revising their curriculum as well, recently deciding to no longer require PO100 (American Political Systems) of all education majors. We realized that this would have a large impact on our curriculum as we had offered five or six sections of that course annually. It was a necessity to rethink how we would use that course time. Finally, as all of us are active researchers, we needed to examine the issue of departmental workload and teaching loads in a creative manner. This required us to scrutinize patterns of course offerings and enrollments in our

planning. **These events force us to deal with principle eight (considering the wider institutional context).**

This is an exciting time in the department of Political Science. We are building on a decade of solid growth in faculty, heightened student enrollment, and deliberate planning. Several years ago our department articulated our mission and objectives as a department and created a related curriculum design. From this starting point, we created a new curriculum (1994) and an assessment program to evaluate our success in meeting our values (1997). As we have developed and assessed our major we have kept the core mission and core objectives central. In the process of hiring, we have been careful to share these central elements of the department with all candidates ensuring compatibility in our expansion of the departmental culture. Since this initial work, the university has developed a new vision and mission statement; so we needed to spend time thinking about how our department interacts with these more global goals. We realized our next step was to evaluate, revise, and then apply these foundational beliefs to our new circumstances. **This work is consistent with principles one (assessment rooted in educational values), two (assessment is rooted in learning, multi-dimensional and occurs over time), and eight (considering the wider institutional context).**

To engage in these activities we received a university summer planning grant, giving us the time to set aside for careful thought and evaluation. **Principle six (recognizing the communal aspect of assessment) and principle ten (assessment in an enabling environment).** Our plan for the week was to do the following:

1. Revise departmental mission statement, with supporting objectives (knowledge, skills, values). **Principle one (assessment rooted in educational values).**
2. Complete curricular revision—this includes the construction of a new understanding of curricular requirements and a new framework (or modified original framework) for conceiving

our curriculum (e.g., tracks, course types, numbering systems, senior theses, internship requirements). **Principle two (assessment is rooted in learning), and principle twelve (enhance educational development).**

3. Revise the Handbook for majors in light of curricular change and update the references and resources. **Principles one (assessment rooted in educational values) and six (recognized the communal nature of assessment).**
4. Lay groundwork for future program review. **Principle eight (considering the wider institutional context), principle ten (assessment in an enabling environment) and principle fourteen (sharing assessment information with a wide audience).**

Assessing the Department: Comparing Performance to Objectives

The first step we needed to take before we began changing our program was to determine what we were doing well already and what needed to be altered. We do not want to change for change sake, but we need to change in order to help our department grow, while maintaining a departmental community we already perceived to be strong. Our first step then was to evaluate the program en toto (we had previously been assessing specific departmental objectives) in light of our prior mission and university goals. **Collectively these activities reflect principles one (assessment rooted in educational values), two (assessment rooted in learning), and twelve (enhance the educational development of students).**

Obtaining Data/Making Discoveries

The data we collected came from a wide variety of sources across and beyond the institution. By making these connections with our different constituencies and different administrative offices,

we found that these groups became vested partners in seeing our assessment and curriculum development process was successful.

• *Alumni Survey*

Replicating our alumni survey of political science graduates from 1980-1995, we surveyed alumni who graduated from 1996-2001, receiving over a 50% return rate. Not only did alumni believe their input was important for our departmental identity and curricular change, but it enabled us to see how our alumni perceived the quality of our work. We discovered some useful feedback in terms of areas in which they noted a need for change; for example, we found that more recent alumni are more satisfied with the department and major than earlier graduates. There were positive trends between the two surveys in almost all areas: a slight increase in perception of diversity of course offerings, and a great increase in perception of quality of major, the rigor of department, and the quality of departmental faculty. One negative trend was a growing concern regarding the perceived lack of internship opportunities. According to our alumni, the weakest area in the department is career counseling. This matches their worry regarding the poor quality of help in finding a job at the university level. **These activities reflect principles six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment) and twelve (enhance educational development of students).**

• *Departmental Major Survey*

Our second source of data was a satisfaction survey of political science majors that was written collectively by the departmental faculty. This survey asks questions about the satisfaction of majors with the political science curriculum, the specific required and elective courses, advising, and the departmental culture in general. We selected questions that correspond with a student satisfaction survey annually conducted at the university level. By doing this we receive comparative data (are our majors more or less satisfied compared to students from the entire university?) and receive specific thoughts and suggestions from our current students regarding their observations on the

department. In addition, this has the added benefit of helping our students feel part of the curricular revision process. Our findings were very positive across the scope of questions; we are higher on every indicator than the university as a whole. Majors rated us especially high on faculty caring and accessibility, rigor, quality, and reputation of the department. We are rated slightly lower in the question of variety of courses; however, freshmen and sophomores are responding in the same way as juniors and seniors, this could be a result of being a four-person department. There were significant differences between students who work more than 20 hours outside of classes and those who don't work extensive hours. Employed students tend to rate us lower on a wide variety of questions. This correlation does not occur with other factors (race, gender, socio-economic status, G.P.A., etc). Despite these differences, the mean response of these students is still very high. One of the strongest positive responses is to the question "I seldom get the 'run-around' when seeking information from the department." This is much higher than the campus response. We believe this demonstrates our success in creating community, a primary objective of our prior departmental mission and objectives. **Consequently, reflecting practices one (assessment rooted in educational values), six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment), and eleven (grounding assessment processes in theory).**

• *Research best practices in Political Science departments*

We also collected and compared the ways in which our peer and aspiration schools' (as selected by the university as a whole) political science departments have constructed political science curricula. We hope to eventually construct our own list of peer and aspiration departments that we will be able to use in our own self-evaluation over the next five years. We found this to be a good resource to see how similarly-situated political science departments (in terms of size, goals, endowment) have constructed their mission and curriculum. We found such a wide variation of

curricula and no clear "best practices" that we felt free to borrow, diverge, and create. **Again reflecting principle six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment).**

• *Course offerings and enrollments data*

Our registrar's office helped us obtain the numbers and sizes of all the courses that faculty in the Department of Political Science have offered over the last five years in the general and major curricula. These enrollment patterns helped us determine what courses need to be offered more or less frequently or what does not need to be offered at all. By seeing courses that consistently do not make enrollment or were oversubscribed, we were able to make decisions that maximize our potential for growth without compromising our quality. **Here we have focused on principle two (assessment rooted in learning—with emphasis on process) and six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment).**

• *Institutional research office data*

Our Director of Institutional Research, Coordinator of Assessment is a political scientist (and co-author of this paper). He knows our department, our students, and our discipline and has been a great resource in helping us construct many of our assessment measures and obtaining much of our data. By including him in our weeklong project he provided us with invaluable insights and asked the most difficult questions. He provided us with university attrition data that revealed when our students switch from political science they tend to go to business and other social science majors. Political science majors leave Millikin at a higher rate than other majors, generally for cost issues. Our new majors are coming from business and exploratory studies majors. **Again, principles two and six are emphasized.** University data (entrance and exit surveys) revealed that Millikin political science freshmen rate themselves higher (than other first year students rate themselves) in academic ability, competitiveness, public speaking ability, and sometimes in leadership ability. We are generally below the norm in self-reported creativity and artistic ability, not surprising in a

school noted for the fine arts. Our students are a little more likely to talk to teachers outside of class than the general freshman student body. In addition, our students are more likely to work for pay than other students. We are well above the university norms when it comes to financial concerns; Millikin political science students are focused on getting a job and being well-off financially. National data demonstrated that Millikin political science students are working more than the norm and there seems to be greater financial need relative to the whole. Consequently, our students are worried about future employment and that their major is not applicable to the job market. More positively, we were able to demonstrate through the data that several of our departmental goals are being met, especially when compared to the national college students and Millikin students. **Principles two, six, and four (focus on student outcomes and experiences) are emphasized.**

Establishing Departmental "Buy-In"

We worried how we could guarantee that all members of the Department were engaged in the process and willing to 1) commit time and resources to departmental change and 2) transform their personal preferences to ensure we would be focusing on departmental goals and objectives over the next few years. To do this, especially when half of the department is new, we needed to get to know and trust each other. Since teaching is a shared emphasis (and demonstrated excellence in teaching is required for tenure) we have been collectively visiting each other's classes. While this has been logistically difficult, the opportunity for us to all see the same classroom experience and then discuss it collectively has been invaluable to our community-building and the assessment of our teaching (especially formatively). Faculty began seeing common goals and ways in which our different teaching styles could reinforce these objectives. To continue this "buy-in" process, each faculty member was responsible for reviewing and analyzing one element of the raw data the chair

collected. **These activities are consistent with principles two, six, and twelve (enhancing educational development).**

Importance of Connections with Administration

The assessment process provides us with two opportunities with administrators. The first is to encourage them to commit to the change and potential of the academic department. If we are building bridges to different administrative offices, illustrating our concerns with their functions (increasing enrollment, meeting financial need, assessing programs), they are more willing to work with us to solve these problems. The initiative for change then rests on the department to find a solution that meets our needs, as opposed to having solutions pressed upon us. For example, Millikin is facing an accreditation self-study in the next years. One of the concerns from the last visit from the accreditation team was the lack of assessment of programs on campus. When the administration-driven assessment push begins on campus in the next few years, we will have already done this in a fashion that helped our program. We will not be subjected to a "cookie-cutter" "one-size fits all" approach to assessment. Second, we now have the evidence necessary to assist in the increasingly data-driven decision making of administrators. For examples, one of the discoveries that came through this process was how comparatively inexpensive we are as a department both at our institution compared to other majors and compared to other political science departments. In times of budget shortfalls and belt-tightening, this documented evidence will help us more than all the self-professed claims of "rigor" and "excellence" (which we can now also demonstrate). **Here we find consistency with principles eight (considering the wider institutional context), nine (assessment as a way to enhance external accountability), and ten (assessment in an enabling environment).**

Closing the Feedback Loop: Change Based on Assessment

Assessment helps us very little if the information does not affect our decision-making or our curriculum. As teaching political scientists, our goal is for assessment to make us better teachers. Assessment that gets placed in a binder and is mounted on shelves across campus, but has no real impact, has limited value at least for the department.

Using Assessment Data to Impact the Curriculum

After beginning with our assessment conclusions, we began asking a series of questions that led to creation of a new curriculum that sought to maintain those elements in which we were successful, but addressed the weaknesses of our program.

1. We wanted this curriculum to be driven by department goals and objectives, so we needed to evaluate, revise, and connect the departmental mission and objectives to the university's and school's missions and visions. Does our current mission and objectives match our vision of what we want to the department to become? We ended this session with a rewritten mission, goals, and objectives on which we have consensus. This was the foundation of curricular revision.

2. The next step was to discuss and determine the structure of the curriculum that we decided to develop. We knew we might find our curricular structure inadequate to our needs and therefore we needed to change and reconsider this structure. We needed to ask: should students follow content-oriented tracks and specialize? Should they focus on skills specific to the political scientists that might be portable to many applications? What unique needs do our majors have that need to be addressed?
   We found these to be some of the most difficult decisions, but had data that aided in our decisions.
3. After the structure was completed, we decided what we wanted to require of all of our majors. We previously had six required courses or experiences, did we want to retain, change, or remove them?
   What should be required of all political science students? How would we ensure our department objectives are being met? This was to be the heart of the curricular and co-curricular decisions. What would new courses include? What would they no longer include? We looked at the survey of majors, asking what has been the most valuable for our students? What has been the least?

4. The next step was to look at workload. How many classes would we need to offer in the general education curriculum? How many sections of American Politics would we need to offer? What

room will we have in our schedules for electives? Is it better to offer fewer electives more frequently? Or more electives less frequently? What is their purpose in our curriculum? What departmental skills and objectives are we not covering?

5. Finally, we needed to ask ourselves how will this change/enhance our departmental goals for constructing a community of scholars? Are we improving this major or just changing it? How flexible is this going to be as we experiment and learn about our own sub fields and students? Where will student experiential education (internships, simulations, independent and directed research) fit into this curriculum?

As you can see, at every aspect of the discussions, we bring in our assessment conclusions and processes to help us in our decision making. More importantly, by basing our curriculum on a specific mission and objectives, we will be able to determine how effective our new curriculum is inculcating our shared values. **Collectively, our curriculum revision process is consistent with principles one (assessment rooted in educational values), two (assessment rooted in learning), six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment), seven (assessment addresses questions people care about), and twelve (assessment enhances educational development).**

Student/Faculty Interactions in Assessment Process

By including students in this discussion at the beginning, making them the first audience to whom the new curriculum is introduced (and showing where their feedback made a difference), we are able to carefully ensure that our larger objective of creating a community is supported. **This important process touches upon principles four (focus on student experiences), six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment), seven (address questions that people care about), and fourteen (sharing assessment information with a wide audiences).**

Results of process: Unity, focus, and goal attainment

As this self-assessment report demonstrates, we have changed and reimagined our department and our mission statement. Realizing from our research that while we have done many things well

in constructing a departmental culture, supporting students in both our pedagogy and advising and providing a rigorous education experience, we also learned that we were weak in one primary area. Both alumni and majors repeated their concern about the ability to find a job after graduation. What was especially interesting was that our students did find employment, albeit not as easily as their cohorts graduating from one of the professional schools. Although this theme was articulated in many different motifs, it was a constant message.

To that end, we have created a mission and objectives that focus more clearly on Millikin's intersections between theory and practice and emphasize the development of portable skills. By creating a skill-based curriculum, students are able to see direct relationships between their career interests and classroom preparation. The development of career-focused publications (departmental) and the institutionalization of annual career workshops and alumni panels will encourage students to see these relationships. We found that many of our objectives have been met and we will seek to maintain those programs and activities that have apparently fostered them.

Conclusion: Best Practices and the MU Political Science Department

The Political Science Department at Millikin University has closely followed several of the recommended best practices spelled out in some of the key assessment literature. This is especially the case for principles one (assessment rooted in educational values), two (assessment rooted in student learning), six (recognizing the communal nature of assessment), eight (considering the wider institutional context), ten (assessment in an enabling environment), and twelve (enhancing student educational development). As a result, the Millikin Political Science department has gotten off to a good start with its assessment program. Department faculty are talking to each other about what matters to them, students have been brought into the assessment process, data designed to answer key questions are being collected and evaluated, a culture of assessment has permeated the

department, the department is known within the institution as one that seeks continual improvement and excellence, and the administration has routinely provided resources to the department over and above what might otherwise be expected. In these very specific ways, assessment has been worthwhile.

This report shows that there is also a middle area where assessment principles have been addressed but are not yet strong. This is where the department plans to focus increased effort immediately. The department needs to more carefully consider the application of principles three (clearly stated, assessable goals), four (focus on student outcomes), five (on-going versus one-shot assessment), and seven (address questions people care about). Finally, assessment activities to date have been weaker in the areas covered by principles nine (external accountability), eleven (theory-driven assessment), thirteen (flexibility of plan), and fourteen (sharing with external audiences). The primary limitation of the department's work has been that we have not received feedback from sources external to the university. We focus too much on the specific and do not connect enough to the general principles underlining our conclusions. We have not provided our conclusions and assessment findings to students and parents in order to hold ourselves further accountable. This paper is one attempt to share our assessment activities with a wider audience.

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Appendix One
Select Principles of Good Assessment Practice

1. Assessment must be rooted in educational values (AAHE, 1992).

2. The assessment process should be rooted in learning, multidimensional and occur over time. (AAHE, 1992).

3. The program to be assessed should have clearly stated goals (AAHE, 1992).

4. Both student outcomes and student experiences are important goals of the assessment process.

5. Assessment works best when it's ongoing as opposed to a "one-shot" or even a series of "one-shot" events (AAHE, 1992).

6. We must recognize and emphasize the communal nature of assessment (AAHE, 1992).

7. Assessment should address questions that people care about (AAHE, 1992).

8. Assessment activity at the department level will usually involve administrative units across t the campus (AAHE, 1992).

9. Assessment helps us meet our responsibilities to students specifically and to the general public more broadly (AAHE, 1992).

10. Assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling (Banta etal 1996).

11. Assessment results are of most value when they shed light on the causal connections between educational practice and educational outcomes (Astin 1993).

12. The basic purpose of student assessment is to enhance their educational development and the basic purpose of faculty assessment is to enhance their performance as teachers and mentors of students and as contributors to the advancement of knowledge (Astin 1993).

13. Assessment should be flexible enough to take into account not only indented educational outcomes but also those that are unintended (Palomba and Banta 1999).

14. Assessment information must be shared with multiple audiences (Palomba and Banta 1999).

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Organization/Address: Millikin University 1184 W. Main Street Decatur, IL 62522	Telephone: 217.424.6321 FAX: 217.424.3993
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